

# Understanding Food Assistance Through Care: Theoretical Insights

Sociological Research Online

2024, Vol. 29(4) 1070–1076

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DOI: 10.1177/13607804241226768

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## Abstract

Two theoretical perspectives have been extensively mobilized to understand the social role of food assistance initiatives, namely ‘food security’ and ‘political economy’. The main objective of this article is to develop an alternative theoretical approach that allows for more comprehensive analyses. Building on Thomas’s (1993) conceptual work on care, it is expected to encourage the development of studies that incorporate less-obvious elements that (also) characterize food assistance organizations, such as the various interactions and practices that are not directly related to food donations.

## Keywords

alternative theoretical approach, care, food assistance

## Introduction

This article endeavours to forge an alternative theoretical approach to comprehend the social role of food assistance initiatives. Its goal is to contribute to the deconstruction of dominant narratives through an interpretive grammar that nurtures a more comprehensive understanding of the food assistance universe. Drawing inspiration from scholars like Beacham (2018), Cloke et al. (2017), and Surman et al. (2021), who advocate examining food assistance initiatives as ‘spaces of care’, this work highlights these environments not merely as providers of material resources but also as venues for diverse relational experiences, including emotional support, therapeutic interactions, and a sense of refuge. However, these perspectives represent only an initial step in constructing a theoretical alternative that enables a profound understanding of the

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organizations in question. Hence, it is crucial to employ an approach capable of encompassing all the elements characterizing this type of response. Thomas's (1993) proposal is particularly intriguing as it advances a set of key dimensions around care that serve as analytical guides for exploring realities such as food assistance initiatives. Despite presenting concrete evidence, this approach requires further theoretical and conceptual development. Therefore, the article takes an exploratory and experimental approach, blending diverse perspectives to craft a theoretical framework that is both coherent and flexible. It is believed that this proposal can contribute to shifting current research agendas away from a focus on structural and formal organizational aspects.

## **The dominant narratives on food assistance**

In the food assistance literature, two theoretical perspectives have been widely discussed, namely 'food security' and 'political economy' (Cloke et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016). The first one considers that the right to food is not fulfilled through charitable organizations (e.g. food banks). These short-term responses are not able to effectively mitigate the problems of hunger, poverty, and food insecurity (Dowler, 2002; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020b). In addition, the existence of these organizations allows other entities (e.g. the state) to assume a less-active role in promoting food assistance and food security (Lambie-Mumford and Loopstra, 2020). The second perspective believes that these same organizations contribute to the advancement of harmful neoliberal logics. According to this critical lens, food assistance is being privatized by initiatives from civil society and the third sector (Poppendieck, 1998; Riches, 1986, 2002). This process reduces the role of the state and calls into question the principles of universality and social justice that characterize the right-to-food approach (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020a). Both perspectives are concerned with the state's ability to ensure access to safe, nutritious, and affordable food and the risks of expanding and growing the universe of (charitable) food assistance (Williams et al., 2016).

Although these narratives provide important clues to understand the reality of food assistance, they risk devaluing any positive effect that organizations operating in the sector can bring to society (Miroso et al., 2016). Food assistance initiatives can perpetuate or exacerbate the social problems they aim to solve (Hanson, 2015; Lupton, 2011; Valenzuela-garcia et al., 2019), but they can also promote positive social values and create opportunities for integration and empowerment (Cloke et al., 2017; Lindberg et al., 2014; Miroso et al., 2016). In addition, these organizations have often operated in the absence of alternative strategies, ensuring food access for populations that would otherwise lack it. Therefore, it is crucial not to endorse a 'politics of abandonment' that calls for the cessation of a particular mode of operation without presenting functional alternatives capable of addressing the basic and urgent needs of vulnerable populations (Cloke et al., 2010, 2017).

It is crucial to note that the dominant critical lenses often focus on structural aspects, including dominant ideologies and the relationships that food assistance initiatives establish with entities such as the state and the market. In doing so, these approaches inadvertently devalue the agency of the individuals comprising these organizations (volunteers and beneficiaries), along with the relationships formed among them and the possibilities that arise from these connections (Williams et al., 2016).

## **The critical lens of care**

The critical lens of care provides a compelling alternative conceptual approach, offering a more nuanced understanding of the universe of food assistance. By assuming that food assistance initiatives are spaces that promote multiple practices of care that are not exclusively related to food donation, it is possible to achieve other levels of reflexivity. This perspective not only reveals the circulation of material resources but also encompasses the emotional, affective, and symbolic dimensions within these contexts (Beacham, 2018; Cloke et al., 2017; Surman et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this insight represents merely the initial stride in achieving a comprehensive understanding of these initiatives. Analysing organizations of this kind requires transcending their functional roles and the nature of interactions they foster. Thus, it is imperative to explore all the defining elements, emphasizing a focus on both the formal organizational structures and the dynamic processes that unfold behind the scenes.

Thomas' (1993) exploration of the concept of care is particularly intriguing as it facilitates a holistic understanding of food assistance initiatives. To contribute to establishing a robust definition of care, the author engages in a dual process: deconstructing existing contributions and constructing a novel analytical proposal. Through an in-depth literature review, Thomas (1993) identifies seven dimensions common to all concepts of care. These include (1) the social identity of the carer; (2) the social identity of the care recipient; (3) the interpersonal relationships between the carer and the care recipient; (4) the nature of care; (5) the social domain within which the caring relationship is situated; (6) the economic character of the care relationship; and (7) the institutional setting in which care is delivered. Each of these dimensions enables an understanding of the relational and organizational processes that concurrently integrate and define food assistance initiatives. The initial three dimensions facilitate exploration into the defining elements of the volunteers, beneficiaries, and the relationships forged between them. Similarly, the last four dimensions facilitate characterizing the organizations in question based on the tasks they undertake, the formality they adopt, the economic value they generate, and the context/environment in which they operate.

After delving into various authors and perspectives on care, Thomas (1993) concludes that it is better characterized as an empirical category rather than a theoretical one. Consequently, the dimensions identified earlier must be integrated with other theoretical frameworks to foster a more profound understanding of the reality under analysis – in this instance, food assistance initiatives. The subsequent section initiates precisely such an experimental exercise, aiming to articulate these elements.

## **Analytical possibilities**

Thomas' (1993) proposal allows a fluid articulation with other concepts and theoretical frameworks. For instance, the examination of food assistance beneficiaries can be illuminated through the analytical category of 'assisted' ('les assistés') developed by Paugam (2003). According to the author, 'assisted' are those who depend on social services and suffer from social disqualification. Thus, it is possible to define the social identity of the care recipient according to these processes and phenomena.

Moreover, the analysis of food assistance volunteers can be enriched by drawing on theories of modernity. The idea that several volunteer profiles currently coexist can be explained by the social changes that occurred during the transition to the second phase of modernity (Monteiro, 2004). The growing processes of individualization, reflexivity, and detraditionalization have contributed to the emergence of volunteers who value experiencing different organizational contexts and types of volunteering (Augusto, 2018). These volunteers coexist with more traditional ones who choose to remain loyal to a single organization and a specific type of volunteering (Monteiro, 2008). Naturally, there are additional volunteer profiles that may or may not amalgamate characteristics from the preceding two categories (Augusto, 2020, 2023). In this way, the social identity of the carer can be explored by considering these theories of modernity.

Finally, considering the interpersonal dynamics between the carer and care recipient through the lens of gift theory offers valuable insights. Food donations can generate reciprocity between volunteers and beneficiaries (de Lima and Oliveira, 2015). The latter may feel indebted to the former and seek to repay the support received, whether through expressions of sympathy or practical gestures like assisting in carrying food boxes (Vlaholias et al., 2015). Conversely, the relationship established between these actors may also engender a dynamic of dependence and domination. If the beneficiary is unable to reciprocate, they may experience a decline in social status, accompanied by feelings of shame (van der Horst et al., 2014).

These examples show how Thomas's (1993) approach can be articulated with other theoretical contributions. By offering a set of analytical dimensions that encompass the diverse elements characterizing food assistance initiatives, this approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of these organizations. Furthermore, such categories are broad enough to accommodate different theoretical perspectives, allowing the exploration of various interpretative possibilities. Thomas's (1993) proposal serves as an empirical guide, facilitating the identification of key elements essential for the development of an investigative process. To enhance the solidity of this guide, a productive dialogue between the literature and empirical data is imperative. Consequently, it is suggested that Thomas's (1993) proposal undergo constant scrutiny and reformulation to ensure a seamless connection between the data and the theory.

## **Discussion and concluding thoughts**

The dominant narratives on the social role of food assistance initiatives have focused on highlighting their structural inefficiencies (Williams et al., 2016). Although they are valid and important perspectives for understanding these organizations, they provide very restrictive interpretations. By focusing mainly on the meso- and macro-levels of analysis, as well as on the operational aspects, these critical lenses tend to ignore the relational elements and opportunities that come with them (Surman et al., 2021). Moreover, by assigning little or no positive value to these responses, such perspectives risk promoting a 'politics of abandonment' (Cloke et al., 2010, 2017). Without functional alternatives that meet the basic needs of populations that resort to food assistance, it is dangerous to appeal, directly or indirectly, to the end of the organizations operating in the sector.

Numerous studies highlight the positive impacts of food assistance initiatives on both participants and the surrounding community (Cloke et al., 2017; Lindberg et al., 2014; Miroso et al., 2016). These initiatives foster empowering encounters that should not be overlooked (Surman et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2016). To comprehensively analyze these organizations, this article proposes an alternative theoretical approach: the critical lens of care. Adopting this perspective has the potential to yield scientifically intriguing discoveries, reshape existing research agendas, and overcome interpretative limitations. Achieving this goal requires moving beyond established care frameworks, such as those explored by Beacham (2018), Cloke et al. (2017), and Surman et al. (2021). A thorough analysis of food assistance initiatives demands an exploration of all their defining elements, extending beyond their emotional and relational aspects.

Thomas' (1993) theoretical proposal on care is particularly interesting and pertinent. By providing several broad analytical dimensions that integrate the various elements characterizing food assistance initiatives, the Thomas' (1993) approach allows for the development of comprehensive social research. Furthermore, it is a proposal that can be articulated with different theoretical contributions, enhancing less restrictive interpretations. Therefore, it is feasible to reconcile, for instance, theoretical frameworks emphasizing structural issues, such as the perspectives of 'food security' and 'political economy', with those concentrating on relationships and the affective dimension, such as the theory of the gift.

This approach can be considered as a theoretical guide that must be progressively reconciled with empirical data. Thus, Thomas' (1993) proposal is both procedural and contextual. It is supposed to be built according to the clues that emerge simultaneously from the literature and field of research. Based on the lexicon mobilized by van der Horst et al. (2014), it is possible to affirm that this approach allows for the integration of the 'dark' and 'light' sides that characterize food assistance initiatives.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The PhD project leading to the reflections expressed in this article has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013)/ERC grant agreement n° 337977 and from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through national funds of the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MCTES) with the references SFRH/BD/130072/2017 and COVID/BD/152385/2022 (PhD grant).

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**Date submitted** 13 September 2023

**Date accepted** 30 December 2023